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Sen. Hatch, I Presume?

Lawmaker Treks to Angolan Rebel Camp

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Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), who helped persuade the Reagan administration to send Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi, spent his summer vacation becoming the first senator to make the clandestine journey into—and out of—the rebel headquarters at Jamba, a feat that requires flying at treetop level and a gut-splitting off-road ride.

He has called a news conference today to show videotapes of burned-out Soviet aircraft that Savimbi's forces claim to have shot down in this year's skirmishing with the Marxist government.

Hatch was escorted into Angola by Michael Pillsbury, the man credited in conservative circles with pushing the Stinger-aid package through the national security bureaucracy as a member of the top-secret "208 Committee," the interagency group that oversees Central Intelligence Agency covert operations for the president and meets in the Situation Room and Room 208 of the Old Executive Office Building.

Pillsbury was fired last spring from his job as assistant undersecretary of defense for policy after being accused by senior White House officials of leaking the president's highly classified Stinger decision to the news media. Pillsbury denied the charges and a Justice Department investigation probably will be closed in the near future with no criminal charges filed, an administration official said yesterday.

One source close to Hatch said the senator received a detailed briefing inside Savimbi's "liberated" territory on the effectiveness of the first shipment of Stingers, but that Hatch will not refer to specific weapon systems in his news conference. Rather, Hatch will say he received a "briefing on the effectiveness of the president's 'effective assistance'" to Savimbi, the euphemism that gripped Washington last winter during the debate over what kind of weapons Savimbi needed to combat Soviet armored assault helicopters.

However, according to one source familiar with the U.S. military assessment of the Angolan battlefield, the Stingers have proved more than 90 percent effective in the hands of Savimbi's troops. Savimbi is still in need of better weapons against Soviet tanks, although another source close to Savimbi said earlier this summer that the rebel army had received a shipment of U.S. Light Antitank Weapons.

The timing of Hatch's foray into the bush was not accidental. Republican conservatives have been looking for a public relations boost to Savimbi's cause as a House vote approaches on ending covert CIA assistance to Savimbi. According to one Hatch publicist, they particularly are looking for publicity to counter a stinging attack on Savimbi by the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, who just completed a tour through southern Africa to support the antiapartheid efforts of the front-line black African states.